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Always a leader, Westmoreland fought from Sicily to Vietnam

By Miles Cunningham
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When the 101st Airborne jumped over Fort Campbell, Ky., on April 23, 1958, gusts blew five of the paratroopers to their deaths. The Screaming Eagles Division commander himself was dragged 200 yards. Thereafter, it is said, Maj. Gen. W.C. Westmoreland jumped ahead of his men to test the winds.

William Childs Westmoreland was president of his high school graduating class, an Eagle Scout, first captain of cadets in his senior year at West Point, the youngest major general in the army in the mid-1950s and, at 47, the second youngest commandant of the military academy. (General of the Army Douglas MacArthur was only 39 when he became commandant at West Point.)

Said the West Point yearbook of 1936 (he graduated 112th in a class of 276): "A fine soldier and true friend is Westy, modest, generous, tolerant and possessing a grand sense of humor."

His experience — the right mix of command, teaching and combat — was just what an aspiring young career officer sought.

He led an artillery battalion through the North African campaign and into Sicily in World War II. He was executive officer of the 9th Infantry Division when it landed on Utah Beach in France on

D-Day. He saw combat from the Hurtgen Forest to the Elbe River.

After the war, Col. Westmoreland took paratroop and glider training at Fort Benning, Ga., taught at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth and later at the Army War College. When the Korean conflict erupted, he was on his way as commander of the 187th Airborne Regimental Combat Team and two combat operations. Later, in Japan in 1952, he made brigadier general.

You might say that when Vietnam called, Gen. Westmoreland was ready.

More than 20 years ago now, Gen. Westmoreland became head of the U.S. Military Assistance Command in Vietnam; he was commander as the war escalated. The general made repeated requests for more U.S. troops until finally half a million American soldiers were fighting in South Vietnam.

In June of 1968, Gen. Westmoreland returned home to become chief of staff, a move seen by many as a signal that President Johnson would escalate the war no further.

Under the Nixon Administration "winding down" and "Vietnamization" were introduced: the U.S. presence was to be eliminated and the South Vietnamese were to be massively strengthened.

Gen. Westmoreland supported Vietnamization but had reservations about the speed with which U.S. troops were pulled out. He feared a four-year American investment in Vietnam was being sacrificed.

As chief of staff, he spoke at civic functions seeking public support for the military and helped lay the groundwork for a volunteer army. He urged President Nixon to hold out for better terms in Vietnam, especially that as a condition of peace the North Vietnamese be required to pull out of South Vietnam.

When the pact was sealed in 1972, Gen. Westmoreland said it had only two virtues: "It ended the American involvement and brought the American prisoners of war home."

In retirement, he denounced the Johnson administration's war strategy, contending he should have been allowed to attack in North Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, backed by intensive bombing.

In Vietnam, Gen. Westmoreland

issued a set of rules to field commanders which began: "Make the welfare of your men your primary concern, with special attention to mess, mail and medical care."

It may be difficult for many Korean and Vietnam veterans to accept, but "Westy" will be 71 on March 26. He appears little changed — erect, trim, 5 feet 11 inches, 180 pounds, brown eyes, white hair (once gray and long ago brown). In 1974, he made an unsuccessful bid for the Republican nomination for governor in his native South Carolina.